

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

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John 10:1-10; Psalm 23

I want to begin by sharing with you a rather disturbing story from the news. This event took place in Houston, Texas. Two weeks ago, on April 11, Erick Aguirre (a-geer-ay) had a date. Aguirre, who is 29 years old, had arranged that he and his date would meet at a restaurant in downtown Houston. They both arrived in their cars and parked in a lot across the street from the restaurant. The parking lot attendant approached them and charged them \$20 for each car. Aguirre paid the man \$40 and the couple headed across the street into the restaurant. At their table, the waiter informed them that the so-called parking lot attendant was actually scamming people out of their parking fee. The man did not work for the restaurant. He just kept the money for himself. Aguirre then got up and left the restaurant, went to his car, and retrieved his gun. He located the scammer, a man named Elliot Nix, and fatally shot him and left him in the street. Aguirre returned the gun to his car and re-entered the restaurant. He was clearly agitated and took his date out to another restaurant and continued their evening for several more hours.

The woman had no idea what had taken place until the next day when the police posted surveillance photos of her and Aguirre announcing that the couple was wanted for questioning. The woman went straight to the police and shared all she knew. Aguirre was arrested.¹

I tell you this story because it illustrates our first scripture reading about the theft of life. What Aguirre did was to deprive Elliott Nix of his life. Stealing \$40 is inconsequential. Aguirre robbed Nix of his life.

Death, of course, is the ultimate theft of life. We have God's commandment, *You shall not murder*. We have Jesus' command to love our neighbors. This killing clearly broke both of those. But death is not the only way that we can be robbed of life.

The things that rob us of life are those adversities that prevent us from experiencing the full joy of life as God desires. It is not about wealth and power or even happiness. It is about joy—the joy of living, the joy of living in God's presence.

But all it takes is something like fear to steal our joy, to rob us of life—fear of death, fear of failure, fear of rejection. Or maybe a past or current trauma or some form of abuse robs us of life. It could be a systematic inequality that pushes us down even when we working so hard to lift ourselves up. There are so many things that

¹ <https://www.click2houston.com/news/local/2023/04/27/man-on-date-in-eado-accused-of-killing-fake-parking-attendant-over-40/>

seek to rob us of our human joy that it is easy to feel that the world is conspiring against us.

Jesus, however, comes to us with the counter message that it is God's desire that we live lives in abundance.

Our reading today from John's gospel requires a bit of untangling. It is a complex metaphor describing Jesus' relationship with his people. It is actually two metaphors that revolve around the images of a shepherd and his sheep and a sheepfold. The sheepfold is the pen where sheep would be brought in at night for their safety.

Jesus says that anyone who enters the sheepfold by any means other than the gate, that person is a thief. The one who does enter by the gate is, by default, the shepherd of the flock. The sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd and the shepherd knows all his sheep by name. Because of their relationship, the sheep will follow the shepherd. Conversely, the sheep will not follow the voice of a stranger. They don't know that person.

The meaning of this metaphor was apparently lost on the disciples. So, Jesus regroups and offers a second metaphor. This time, instead of being the shepherd, Jesus describes himself as the gate of the sheepfold. *I am the gate*, he says. Any who came before and claimed to be a gate, those were thieves. But now, all those who enter through the gate ("me") will be saved. Jesus concludes saying, *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

This passage with its sheep and the shepherd is about salvation. These words of Jesus are words of hope to a world that feels that it only knows pain and loss. The people in Jesus' time, as today, felt like they had been robbed of life. They felt like bandits had jumped the fence and taken something precious from them. But as shepherd, Jesus is there on behalf of the sheep that are in his care. He watches and protects them. He makes it possible that they not only have life, but have it in abundance.

And that raises the next question: What is abundant life? What does it mean to live life in abundance? One scholar argues that this statement of Jesus is the heart of the gospel. *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.* Does life in abundance mean wealth and power and excess? No. Abundant life means flourishing fully in who we are. It is not just survival; it is when we thrive. It is having a full and complete relationship with God. Abundant life is a priceless treasure.

Now, we could spend the rest of the day discussing the meaning of abundant life, but there is an easier way. And that is to look at one of the classic passages of

our scripture that is nothing less than a full exposition of abundant life. If you want a definition of abundant life, then just turn to the 23rd Psalm.

The 23rd Psalm, written generations before the time of Christ, also employs the metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep. But this time it is God who is the shepherd as we know from those opening words, *The Lord is my shepherd*. The psalmist invites us to imagine what it would be like to be a sheep in God's flock. We would want for nothing. We would have good water and plentiful food. God would guide us to the right places, and, moreover, God would restore our souls.

The psalmist tells us that with God as shepherd, even when the sheep find themselves traversing the *darkest valley* (or *the valley of the shadow of death*), they will be immune to the evil that surrounds them. The rod and staff—tools of a shepherd—are present and they transmit a reassuring sense of comfort. God the shepherd is always at work.

Finally, the shepherd metaphor closes and the psalmist describes the sumptuous table that has been set by God. Even though our enemies may surround us, we are safe with the Lord. And we are not only safe, but we are beloved—blessed with God's anointing oil. The cup of life overflows when we are with God. Because of God's presence, our lives shall be marked by God's *goodness and mercy*. And the pasture that the psalmist first described as the place where the sheep lie down has been transformed. It is now the house of the Lord.

This is the abundant life that we can find with God—dwelling in God's house, safe and nourished and blessed. It sounds almost like the kingdom, doesn't it.

As followers of Christ, it is our joy to live in this life abundant. But it is also our responsibility. As followers of Christ, we don't enter into God's home and then pull up the drawbridge so that we have the place to ourselves. No.

Our world is consumed with far too many instances of life being stolen. This is not how God chooses it to be. As followers of Christ, it is our calling to guide others to experience abundant life where they may be. Church isn't just the place to hear about abundant life but is the place that challenges us to help others so that they may experience the blessings of this sacred reality.

An example of this can be seen in Margaret Ann's and Adrianna's recent trip to Guatemala with a team of Middle Tennessee Presbyterians. They traveled to the poorest region of that country to a place where our presbytery has developed a partnership with the churches there. Our team brought basic medical care to the people—fluoride treatments for children, eyeglasses, anti-parasite medications, and more. They did this in order that those people may come closer to experiencing abundant life. By traveling to Guatemala, not only did this team deliver medical

care, but they also delivered the message that the Guatemalans are part of God's flock, and they are blessed.

I could list other examples of the church's demonstration of abundant life, but I want you to do it. In your bulletin is a small piece of paper. I want you to write on this paper either an example of abundant life that you've experienced personally or one that you have witnessed recently. You can place these papers in the offering plate or hand them to me after the service or leave them in the office. I will compile your answers and share them with you this week. I want to know how you have received a glimpse of God's realm.

Abundant life is a gift of God. It is the gift we enjoy when we choose to follow our Lord.